BENEATH HILL 60: A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

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The horrors of the First World War, so erroneously designated ‘the war to end all wars’ by former United States president Thomas Woodrow Wilson, have provided the basis for some remarkable films. Everyone has at least heard of such movies as All Quiet on the Western Front (Lewis Milestone, 1930, from Erich Maria Remarque’s novel) and Journey’s End (James Whale, 1930, from R.C. Sherriff’s play). These films, along with Joseph Losey’s King and Country (1964), the little-seen British film The Trench (William Boyd, 2000) and, to go back nearly a hundred years, the famous documentary The Battle of the Somme (1916, shot by Geoffrey Malins and John McDowell), have left us with images of mud and terror, rats and filth. These impressions have been corroborated by the artists who depicted the conflict, perhaps most notably Paul Nash, who painted the iconic The Menin Road (1919).

There were plenty of other titles that came to mind as I was watching Jeremy Hartley Sims’ powerful new film Beneath Hill 60, which tells of how Australian miners changed the course of the war in 1916 when they tunnelled beneath enemy lines. The situation of the father-and-son tunnellers Jim (Alan Dukes) and Walter Sneddon (Alex Thompson) has echoes of a similar situation in Howard Hawks’ The Road to Glory (1936); the necessity for an officer to sacrifice his men recalls Hawks’ The Dawn Patrol (1930). As for Australian cinema and the First World War, there hasn’t been anything in recent decades other than Peter Weir’s Gallipoli (1981) and Ken Hannam’s Break of Day (1976). Given the huge dramatic potential of this most terrible war, so resonant in Australia’s national coming of age, this is somewhat surprising. Beneath Hill 60 is based on a true story, like Gallipoli and the European film Joyeux Noël (Christian Carion, 2005) – the latter is the heart-stopping story of enemies playing football in no-man’s-land on Christmas Eve 1914. The last film I’d draw attention to in this contextualising introduction is G.W. Pabst’s Kameradschaft (1931), set shortly after the First World War, in which German miners rescue French miners trapped underground near the newly established French–German border.
A film is a film and must stand on its own merits, but viewers will still come to a new movie with intertextual baggage that may influence how it is received. I’d say here that Beneath Hill 60 can hold its head up in some very distinguished company. Its factual roots are in the exploits of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company and its efforts to blow up a German bunker and aid the Allied forces in the Belgian district of Ypres (‘Wipers’ to Anglophone soldiers). Oliver Woodward, a Queenslander passionately devoted to his work in the Papuan mines, finally enlists in 1916 and becomes commanding officer of a platoon of ex-miners whose task is to disrupt the German offensive, initially near Armentières in France. There is resentment from the British, who are afraid that the tunnellers will further endanger them, but when Woodward and his platoon pull off a daring raid on a German gun emplacement, having crossed no-man’s-land under fire, the officers in charge order them on to Hill 60, under which lies a labyrinth of tunnels. It is the task of Woodward’s men to keep the tunnels free of mud and water and, finally, to detonate a monstrous cache of explosives.

There is predictably a good deal of tension in this enterprise, but as it comes to its narrative climax, the film also manages to be extremely moving. If, like me, you didn’t know about the Australian Tunnelling Company, you may well be fascinated by the idea of how so specialist a group of men – men who had been trained for the mines, not for war – came to be in the foreground of so crucial a moment in a long and hideous war. Screenwriter David Roach has drawn on Woodward’s unpublished war diary, which describes how several thousand Australian miners were given only very rudimentary military training and sent off to the Western Front. In the film, we see that the enemy has the same aim as the Austral-
One of the strengths of Roach’s screenplay, and indeed of Sims’ direction, is that it allows the German tunnellers a comparable sense of purpose and commitment to their perilous task; they are not just rendered as indiscriminately malevolent ‘others’.

Taking a true story as the starting point for a feature film does not guarantee that it will offer psychological and emotional truth, but on the whole Beneath Hill 60 actually does. It is achieved through the skilful unfolding of its plot, which resists linearity in favour of a sustained process of alternation. After an evocative image of a soldier lacing boots and buckling his belt, the film plunges us underground. We see Lieutenant Woodward (Brendan Cowell) arriving via tunnels, with gun in hand, and taking command of a platoon of tunnellers. He has been late in enlisting, a fact that is cause for resentment among those men who have been enduring the vileness of trench warfare for a couple of years. The film wants us to wonder why he has not been there earlier, but we are diverted by a sudden attack that leads to the injury of a young soldier. Woodward takes the soldier with him to the officers’ dugout, and the British Lieutenant Clayton (Leon Ford) rebukes him for doing so. In the officers’ quarters we see the Australians – but not Woodward – exchange photos of wives, girlfriends and mothers. At this point a number of potential conflicts have been adumbrated, and I’ll return to these.

The crucial element of the plot structure is the fact of Woodward’s late enlistment. Sims and Roach have opted to throw Woodward into the arena of war, then insert flashbacks to eighteen months
previously, to glorious outback Queensland. From then on the film alternates between the claustrophobia of the tunnels and the dirt and danger of the trenches and the Australian episodes designed to help us understand Woodward’s situation. In the first of the flashbacks, he arrives at the pleasant homestead of the Waddells, whose sixteen-year-old daughter Marjorie (Bella Heathcote) is plainly attracted to Woodward, though her mother (Jacqueline McKenzie) scolds her for being ‘forward’. Woodward talks to the family about his experiences in the mines of Papua – ‘I quite like it down there. It’s snug …’, a remark that reminds us of the film’s opening sequence. Subsequent Queensland-set episodes chart the progression of Woodward from commitment to enlistment and then to his forging a relationship with Marjorie. He has been sent white feathers, though his Papuan stint clears him of cowardice, and then news of the death of the Waddells’ son comes. ‘You don’t have to go,’ Marjorie insists, as she throws her arms around him. But at their next meeting, in a scene following one in which there has been a major explosion at the Front, he tells her he is joining the mining battalion and asks her permission to write to her. He is established in these sequences as a man of honour and integrity, and in the scene in which he seeks Marjorie’s father’s approval to write to her there is a moving sense of decorum in both the writing and in Cowell’s performance.

While this domestic background is being established in order to help us understand Woodward’s situation, there are longer, interleaving sequences in which he earns the respect of his platoon, though without the conventional heroics of Hollywood war films. In these episodes there initially doesn’t seem to be quite enough character differentiation among the men, but gradually they reveal just enough individuality. For instance, there is the father-son team of Jim and Walter Sneddon: Jim enlisted when he found his son had done so, on the grounds that ‘I’ve looked after him all his life, I’m not gonna stop now’, and his wife, distraught at first, ‘has been knitting like buggery ever since’. The fate of the Sneddons is treated with restrained pathos. The blandly amiable McBride (the excellent character actor Anthony Hayes) is reunited much later with Woodward in mud and rain and is now a captain. The boy Frank Tiffin (Harrison Gilbertson) doesn’t want to go back to the pits and
has dreams of being a carpenter after the war is over: he will be the catalyst for the film’s tensest and most harrowing moments. The Canadian Major North (Aden Young) is at the end of his tether and the edge of sanity.

The incidents that make up this part of the film’s alternations generate their own tension, with explosions the inevitable outcome, but if that makes the narrative sound merely repetitive that is not what I intend. There is a gruelling sense of the nightmare of this horrific war, of the cramped camaraderie below the ground and in the sodden trenches; the explosions are clearly distinguished from each other in their purposes and outcomes, and in what they reveal of those who set them off and those who are endangered by them. This is not one of those war films where it is difficult to know who is doing

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what to whom, as if all the filmmakers had in mind were a series of slam-bang action events. The final explosion involving Hill 60 itself is not merely a narrative climax but makes excruciating moral and emotional demands on Woodward, in a situation recalling a moment in the recent US film *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009).

The alternation technique provides a simple contrast between the life Woodward has come from and will return to and the unbearable demands of the tunnels and trenches, between the claustrophobia of the war and the sweeping vistas of outback Queensland. The film and the audience need this kind of contrast and the filmmakers know this. Sims is well served by his cinematographer Toby Oliver and editor Dany Cooper, whose respective contributions reinforce the

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contrasts. It is fatuous to talk of a film as ‘looking wonderful’ but not when that ‘look’ is so patently at the service of its dramatic impact.

The cross-cutting between these two strands of drama strengthens our sense of the kinds of conflict at work in the film. This is a war film, so of course there are going to be adversaries at the most obvious level. As I’ve said, the Germans are allowed a human particularity: there are clear distinctions between the intense Sergeant Babek (Kenneth Spiteri) and his youthful offsider Wagner (Marcus Costello). In some ways they parallel the Woodward and Tiffin characters/relationship on ‘our’ side. As a military force the Germans are not demonised, and the German Kommander Fusslein (David Ritchie) is no more officious or unsympathetic than Colonel Rutledge (Chris Haywood), commander of the three Allied tunnelling companies. There is tension between the Australians and the British, too: in the officers’ dugout, it is clear that Lt Clayton believes himself to be in the company of lesser mortals (outback Australians). There is something simplistic in the way this sense of imperial hierarchy is rendered, but the notion of class hierarchy was anticipated when Woodward asked for the officers’ dugout. There is also the potential for conflict between Woodward and those who’ve answered the call to arms well before he has. In other words, this is a war film with more on its mind than action; it achieves an emotional and thematic texture that commands attention.

*Beneath Hill 60* also commands attention on several other scores. Brendan Cowell, so impressive in the police procedural *Noise* (Matthew Saville, 2007), looks more than ever like the first major star of Australian film since Geoffrey Rush took the world by storm in *Shine* (Scott Hicks, 1996). In both strands of the film’s narrative, Cowell exhibits the kind of presence that suggests a total immersion

in the demands of character and a capacity to compel the audience with only the smallest external flickers of this inwardness. The cast – new faces, including the exquisite Bella Heathcote and the very touching Harrison Gilbertson, and well-regarded veterans of local cinema such as Chris Haywood, John Stanton and Jacqueline McKenzie – create an ensemble to equal that of the recent *Blessed* (Ana Kokkinos, 2009).

Somehow I missed Jeremy Sims’ directorial debut, *Last Train to Freo* (2006). On the strength of his orchestration of a range of talents before and behind the camera in *Beneath Hill 60*, and the way he has dealt with a little-known aspect of Australian history, I need to repair this omission without delay.

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